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This book is intended for readers aged 18 and up. It may contain themes considered "mature."

ASHES, ASHES

JD MORVAN WALTER REY MACUTAY

JD MORVAN
AUTHOR

REY MACUTAY
ARTIST

WALTER
COLORS

BASED ON THE NOVEL "RAVAGE" BY **RENÉ BARJAVEL**

Translation by Jeremy Melloul
Localization and Editing by Mike Kennedy
Layout and Lettering by Chris Northrop

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I'VE NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE IT... THE NANOMACHINES CAN MAKE MIRACLES...

ARE THERE ANY OTHER OCCUPIED CELLS?

NUMBER 3. A MAN WHO BELIEVED HIMSELF TO BE... DEATH.

CAN'T SEE ANYTHING, IT'S PITCH BACK.

HIS AURA MUST HAVE DARKENED EVERYTHING.

2

3

WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

I HAVE TO SEE THIS.

DOCTOR, THINK BEFORE YOU OPEN IT. EVERYTHING WE'VE SEEN SO FAR HAS POINTED TO EXTRAORDINARY FORCES AT PLAY HERE...

YOU... YOU'RE RIGHT. IT WOULDN'T BE REASONABLE.

3

LET'S GO TO THE LAB INSTEAD...

HERE'S WHERE THEY PERFORMED THEIR EXPERIMENTS...

LOOK, THERE'S A BUNCH OF SYRINGES IN THIS CLOSET.

PROBABLY THE SERUM THAT CONTAINS THE NANOMACHINES.

THEY'RE IN GOOD CONDITION. THERE ARE EVEN CASES TO TRANSPORT THEM SAFELY...

IF WE WANT TO LIVE FOREVER, THAT MIGHT BE WITHIN REACH WITH THOSE...

LET'S TAKE A FEW KITS. IT COULD BE USEFUL.

AND NOW WE KNOW WHERE TO FIND MORE.

AND IF WE HOLD ONTO THE KEYS, NOBODY ELSE WILL BE ABLE TO COME IN AND STEAL THEM.

DOCTOR, ARE YOU COMING...?

SORRY, I HAVE TO KNOW...

NO!

HE LOOKED DEATH IN THE FACE!

I'M CLOSING THE DOOR!

WHATEVER YOU DO, DON'T LOOK INSIDE!

HE COULDN'T HELP HIMSELF...!

MARTIN!

DOCTOR!

THEY'RE BOTH DEAD...

WHAT IF...

2

...IT'S CRAZY, BUT I HAVE TO TRY!

WHAT... WHAT'S GOING ON?

YOU WERE DEAD, MARTIN... BUT YOU'RE BETTER NOW.

HOLD ON, WE'RE GOING.

THE DOCTOR WAS RIGHT, THIS PRODUCT IS REALLY INCREDIBLE...

STAY HERE, I'M GOING TO BRING HIM BACK TO SEE... LAZARUS.

I'LL BE BACK.

HE LEFT!

EMPTY?!

NARCISSE, WHY DIDN'T YOU STOP HIM!?

NARCISSE?!

TOO LATE...

WE'LL NEVER CATCH HIM NOW...

DR FAUQUE
DR FAUQUE

NARCISSE, GET UP. IT'S TIME.

BLANCHETTE, THE SUN'S COMING UP.

EVERYONE UP! WE'RE GOING!

COME WITH ME, NARCISSE.

MY FRIENDS, I THINK WE'RE ABOUT TO SET FOOT...

...INTO HELL!

TAKE SHELTER BEHIND THE ROCKS!

THUUBI

PIEEEEERRRRRREEE!!!

PIERRE...

STOP!

YOUR WEAPONS OR YOUR LIFE!

I'M SORRY BUT... LOOK AT US. WE HAVE NOTHING TO GIVE YOU.

CAP THIS BOYS, THIS CHICK WANTS TO TALK BACK TO ME...?

MAYBE WE CAN HELP YOU WITH LABOR IN EXCHANGE FOR SOME SHELTER AND...

DIE, SLUT!

!!!

RHHHAAAAAAA!!!!

WE'RE GOING... NOW!

WHAT ABOUT NARCISSE?!

HE CHOSE HIS DEATH...

LET'S HONOR THAT CHOICE BY SURVIVING!

DO...

DO YOU SEE THIS?

GREEN PLANTS!

IT'S BEEN WEEKS SINCE WE'VE SEEN ANY...

IT'S WINTER SAVORY.

I CAN SEE A LOT MORE TO THE SOUTH FROM UP HERE.

WE'RE LEAVING THE DEVASTATION!

PARADISE...

I FORGOT THAT BEAUTIFUL PLACES LIKE THIS EXISTED...

NOT TO MENTION THE FOOD...!

IT WAS DELICIOUS.

THE RESTAURANT'S CELLARS WERE STILL COOL...

THE CHEF MUST HAVE LIKED TO KEEP THINGS FRESH...

HUH?!

WHAT THE HELL IS THIS?!

RHAAA!!!

?!

FOLLOW MY LEAD!

WHAT'S HAPPENING HERE EXACTLY?!

ONE FINAL TRIAL..

...TO SEE IF WE'RE TRULY WORTHY TO REJOIN THE WORLD OF THE LIVING.

MILLY!

MOM!

FRANCOIS, MY BOY...!
AND HIS PRETTY BLANCHETTE...

WE ARE GATHERED HERE TODAY TO BURY THE MAN YOU CALLED PATRIARCH.

ME, I CALLED HIM FRANCOIS.

AND HE CALLED ME "BLANCHETTE."

FRANÇOIS DES CHAMPS

I NEVER LIKED THAT NICKNAME, BUT I LET HIM USE IT...

...AS YOU KNOW, HE NEVER LIKED TO BE CONTRADICTED.

FRANÇOIS DES CHAMPS

WE WERE BOTH BORN IN THIS VILLAGE, ON TWO NEIGHBORING FARMS, 129 YEARS AGO.

HE WAS OLDER THAN ME BY JUST A FEW DAYS. EVERYONE THOUGHT I WAS BEAUTIFUL. EVERYONE KNEW HE WAS STRONG.

EVERYONE WAS IMPRESSED BY HIS BRILLIANT MIND, AND FASCINATED BY MY ARTISTIC TALENTS. EVERYONE WANTED US TO LOVE EACH OTHER, SO WE DID.

WHY FIGHT IT WHEN IT WAS SO OBVIOUS...? AND A CLICHE ALWAYS REASSURES PEOPLE. MYSELF INCLUDED. OUR LOVE WASN'T FAKE.

I KNEW HIM BETTER THAN ANYONE, AND HE THOUGHT HE KNEW WHAT WAS BEST FOR ME. I HAD MORE OPINIONS THAN HE KNEW, BUT I COULD NEVER SHOW IT. WHO KNOWS WHY. THAT TRAP HAD BEEN SPRUNG TOO YOUNG. I COULD NEVER BE MYSELF WITH HIM.

WHEREAS HE NEVER KNEW HOW TO BE ANYONE BUT HIMSELF. THAT CAUSED HIM PROBLEMS IN THE WORLD YOU NEVER KNEW. BUT THE CATACLYSM ALLOWED HIM TO TRULY BE HIMSELF. FOR ME, IT WAS THE OPPOSITE.

IN THE CAPITAL OF THIS COUNTRY, WHICH WAS THEN KNOWN AS FRANCE, I HAD THE AUDACITY TO EMANCIPATE MYSELF. I HAD GONE TO LIVE THERE BEFORE HIM, AFTER FINISHING WHAT WE CALLED OUR "STUDIES"... I HAD SIGNED A CONTRACT TO BECOME A SINGER. MY FINANCIER HAD BET A LOT ON ME. HE WAS UGLY, VULGAR, AND PRETENTIOUS, BUT HE OFFERED ME INDEPENDENCE.

I KNOW YOU CAN'T REALLY UNDERSTAND SUCH A STRANGE WORLD. TO PUT IT SIMPLY: I HAD THE CHOICE BETWEEN FOLLOWING FRANCOIS AND BECOMING EVEN MORE FAMOUS THAN HE IS TO YOU.

I HESITATED...

BUT THE CATACLYSM DECIDED FOR ME. FRANCOIS SAVED MY LIFE. I KNOW IT'S IMPOSSIBLE, BUT IT'S LIKE HE WAS DESTINED FOR THIS. WHEN WE WERE IN THAT BURNING BUILDING, I KNEW RIGHT AWAY THAT THE TRAP HAD CLOSED IN AROUND ME. IN A QUARTER OF A SECOND, I RESIGNED MYSELF TO NEVER SAYING NO TO HIM AGAIN.

YOU ALL KNOW THE STORY OF OUR JOURNEY HERE. WE TAUGHT IT TO YOU IN SCHOOL. OVER THE YEARS, OUR ODYSSEY HAS ALMOST BECOME MYTH. HE DIDN'T RUN 50 KILOMETERS TO MEET ME IN THE TOWER. THE BUTCHER WASN'T REALLY TEN FEET TALL. HE DIDN'T SAVE MRS. DURILLOT BY STOPPING THE TREE WITH HIS BODY.

BUT IN THE END, THOSE ARE ALL JUST DETAILS.

YOUR PATRIARCH WAS A HERO. DON'T THINK I'M SAYING OTHERWISE. BUT BECAUSE YOU'VE CHOSEN ME TO SPEAK ABOUT HIM ONE LAST TIME, LET ME TELL HIM WHAT I NEVER KNEW HOW TO SAY...

FRANCOIS, WHEN THEY TOLD ME YOU WERE DEAD, I FELT RELIEF... AND IMMEDIATELY GUILTY THAT I WASN'T SAD. IT MADE ME THINK BACK ON ALL THOSE MANY YEARS... I DIDN'T WANT YOU TO PROLONG MY CAPTIVITY BY INJECTING ME WITH THE SAME SERUM YOU TOOK.

YOU INSISTED THAT IT WAS AN INCREDIBLY GENEROUS GIFT, BECAUSE WHAT YOU GAVE ME TOOK AWAY FROM YOUR PERSONAL SUPPLY AND, BY EXTENSION, YOUR OWN LIFE. SO I ACTED GRATEFUL AND THANKED YOU. BUT EACH OF THOSE LIFE-EXTENDING INJECTIONS ATE AWAY AT MY SOUL.

EVERY DAY, I SAW YOU BECOME MORE POWERFUL. AND MORE AUTHORITARIAN. YOU WERE CONVINCED YOU WERE ALWAYS RIGHT ABOUT EVERYTHING.

MAYBE YOU WERE, BUT ONLY BECAUSE YOUR TRUTH WAS IMPOSED OVER EVERYTHING.

YOU ARRANGED THE MARRIAGES OF OUR SEVENTEEN CHILDREN TO CONSOLIDATE YOUR INFLUENCE. YOU MADE ALLIES, SUBJECTS, AND ENEMIES.

YOU CRUSHED YOUR ENEMIES IN THE WARS THAT HAD BECOME YOUR LAST REASON FOR LIVING. AND YOU DIED WHERE YOU WERE BORN. SO CLOSE TO THE PLACE WHERE WE FIRST KISSED, DURING THE BASTILLE DAY DANCE AT THE END OF RUE PARADIS.

I'M JUST AS RESPONSIBLE FOR ALL OF THIS SINCE I NEVER REFUSED YOU.

YOU GAVE ME EVERYTHING... BUT YOU MOSTLY GAVE ME THINGS I DIDN'T WANT. I'M NOT TRYING TO PASS MYSELF OFF AS A VICTIM.

THAT DAY, I GAVE YOU MY HEART, AND YOU THOUGHT IT WAS MY LIFE. I FORGIVE YOU. MOST MEN THINK THE SAME THING WHEN IT COMES TO WOMEN.

YOU TOLD YOUR LIEUTENANTS THAT IF SOMETHING BAD HAPPENED TO YOU ONE DAY, IT WOULD BE UP TO ME TO CARRY YOUR TORCH. I'M SURE YOU THOUGHT OF THAT AS ANOTHER GIFT. I CONSIDER IT A POISON.

SO HERE, TODAY, FOR THE FIRST TIME, I'M TELLING YOU...

NO.

I WILL NOT CONSOLIDATE YOUR EMPIRE. I WILL LET IT DISAPPEAR WITH YOU.

I'M FREEING MYSELF OF YOU, FRANCOIS.

AND I'M FREEING YOUR VASSALS FROM YOUR PATRIARCHY.

IT'S DIFFICULT TO LIVE FREE, AND MANY OF THEM WILL TURN INTO LITTLE KINGS...

"...WHO WILL FIGHT AGAINST OTHER LITTLE KINGS TO TAKE POWER."

IT WILL BE SAD BUT IT WON'T BE MY PROBLEM.

THE END OF MY LIFE WILL BE SHORT, BUT I WANT IT TO TRULY BE MINE.

IT WILL BE MY ONLY CHANCE TO FALL ASLEEP ONE LAST TIME WITHOUT REGRETTING...

...HOW MUCH I LOVED YOU.

END